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ABSTRACT

A brief description is given of a small school district in which the Mastery Learning approach to instruction has been operative since 1971. This study examined the teacher evaluation records written by the school principals in the District in order to determine the behaviors, attitudes and actions that these school administrators encourage in teachers, and the teacher behaviors, actions and activities that are taking place in the district as perceived by the principals. The District was chosen for the study because it is becoming well-known for the excellence of its program and for the extraordinary achievement results its students are obtaining. An analysis of the data from these reports is used to compose a profile of the principals' concept of the "mastering teacher"--one who possesses the knowledge, expertise, and skills that result in an excellent job performance with excellent results. All of the principals, without exception, placed a great deal of emphasis on and encouraged behaviors, actions, and attitudes that would enable teachers to grow professionally as well as contribute toward the goals of excellence through the implementation of Mastery Learning. (JD)

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PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES: A CASE STUDY

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This study is an investigation through the use of written teacher evaluation records of the actions, behaviors, and attitudes that principals at the Columbia School District (CSD)[1] perceive and encourage in teachers with respect to the district's instructional program. Specifically, we are exploring the use of these documents as records of instructional leadership and as a method of information dissemination and feedback from the principals to the teachers in a school district with a reputation for excellence.

Setting Where Principals Work

The CSD is located in a small blue-collar city in the Central New York region. Its population is approximately 21,000 people (25% are retirees), and it is considered a low to middle socio-economic city. The CSD has four schools (two elementary, one middle high, and one high school) that serve approximately 2,700 students from grades K-12.

This city is a "conservative blue-collar community that likes to think of itself as a place where people aren't interested in change just for the sake of change. The school system was known for not having adopted any of the educational fads so prevalent in the 1960's" (Brandt, 1981,

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[1] The CSD is a pseudonym.

p.2). However, in the late 1960's, the CSD decided to reexamine its ongoing school organizational and educational practices in order to raise the academic achievement level of its student population. In order to accomplish this, the district decided to follow a mastery learning approach as first described by Bloom (1968). "The premises and promises of mastery learning played an important role during this period" (Champlin, 1980, p.2). When working under a mastery learning approach, it is assumed both that almost all students can learn what is taught in schools and that school learning can be greatly improved provided that favorable learning conditions are present (Block, 1971; Block and Anderson, 1975; Anderson and Block, 1977; Bloom, 1968, 1971, 1976; Guskey, 1985). Operating under these assumptions, the CSD created and defined an instructional process which, for purposes of its curricular and instructional organization, is divided into three stages: (a) the pre-instructional stage, (b) the instructional stage, and (c) the post-instructional stage.

The CSD began implementing its reorganized instructional process on a small scale in 1971 with only two three-teacher teams one of their elementary schools. Over the years, through the use of an intensive staff development program, other teachers had the opportunity to be incorporated into this program, and, by 1978, the district

reported that this instructional process was in use throughout its whole system. This district is becoming well-known around the country for the excellence of its program and for the extraordinary achievement results its students are obtaining (Brandt, 1981; Suarez, 1985; Vickery, 1988; Vogel, 1980).

In a school district where excellence in school achievement seems to be the norm, it is also necessary to find out what other organizational or instructional aspects could be making an impact on the district's success. For example, what roles do administrators play in promoting such a program? What types of support did the community provide to the school system? What instructional practices are carried out in the classroom and what support systems exist for students? In other words, all the possible factors that may be associated with a program's success or failure should be analyzed in terms of their impact in the overall effectiveness of the program. Rowen, Bossert and Dwyer (1983, p.30) point to the fact that " while research on effective schools calls for a schoolwide emphasis on instruction and for instructional leadership, its failure to provide fine-grained analyses of within school processes makes such calls vacuous." This study explores one alternative for filling this void by examining the teacher

evaluation records written by the school principals at the CSD as documents of information dissemination and feedback to the teachers.

Design of the Study

We examined in detail the principals' perceptions as recorded in evaluation records of teachers' instructional practice at the CSD . In particular, we analyzed these records to examine the behaviors, attitudes and actions that these school administrators encourage in teachers and the teacher behaviors, actions and activities that are taking place in the district as perceived by the principals.

The primary source of data for this study is the annual written teacher-evaluation records of the CSD. All the evaluation records for all the teachers in the district (from the two elementary, the middle high, and the high school) during a period of five years (from 1980-1981 through 1984-1985) have been collected and are being analyzed. With approximately 180 teachers in the schools, the total number of evaluation records used for the study is 900. Also, we have collected unpublished documents from the central district offices which provide information about the changes that have occurred in the district from the early 1970's through the mid 1980's concerning the philosophy, and the instructional and organizational practices used in the district.

In the CSD, each building principal is in charge of writing teacher evaluation reports at the end of the school year. These evaluation records which are the data of this study were written by six principals during this five-year period. One of the elementary schools and the high school, had only one principal each for the five years. The other elementary school and the middle high, had two principals each during the five-year period covered by the data.

The evaluation records consist of three different sections. The main section called the General Teaching Performance Summary is descriptive in nature and provides, as its title indicates, a summary of a teacher's performance at the end of each school year. This description, which in most of the cases is summarized in one or two paragraphs, states the quality of the job done by the teacher, the classroom performance, the involvement in different school or district projects, and the professional growth of the teachers for the year.

The second section consists of a rating scale with eleven different teacher behaviors and/or activities deemed both important and necessary to promote student achievement and district growth. Each teacher is rated on each item according to three categories: developing, maintaining, and not implementing. Developing means that the teacher is further exhibiting a behavior beyond what has been

previously observed. Maintaining means that there has not been a change in the behavior from the last evaluation, and not implementing refers to the fact that the teacher is not displaying a particular behavior.

The third section of the evaluation record states the Summary of Observations for Growth and Improvement. This refers to the individual-growth goals each teacher plans in collaboration with the administrator, which serve as a part of the groundwork for future evaluations.

Methodology

Working under a symbolic interactionist perspective, this qualitative study focuses on describing the images principals have of teachers' performances. Using this approach, abstractions are built as the particulars that have been gathered are grouped together. It is in this way that grounded description emerges from many separate although interconnected pieces of the collected information (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p.29). The data analysis has followed the techniques and methodology of the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

We have also used QUALOG (Shelly and Sibert, 1985), a logic programming system for qualitative analyses which facilitates the tasks of interpreting data and testing questions about those interpretations.

ANALYSIS AND EMERGING RESULTS

At this point in the analysis, we have developed a model (figure 1, p. 9) that depicts the instructional approach the school principals in this district follow in their evaluation of the teachers. This model represents an approach utilized by the school administrators not only for the dissemination of information and feedback to the teachers but also for vigorously promoting the goals of the school district. With the model, we also want to portray an image of the principals' instructional leadership role which resembles that of the district's philosophy towards mastery learning and goals for students, but which is here extended towards the teachers. In other words, the process the school principals use for the evaluation of teachers in general follows a mastery learning approach, but in particular, it really exemplifies a mastery teaching approach.

Although we will briefly describe what the categories in our model mean, we will concentrate foremost on presenting and describing only one of these categories: Mastering Teacher.[2] We chose to focus our attention on this

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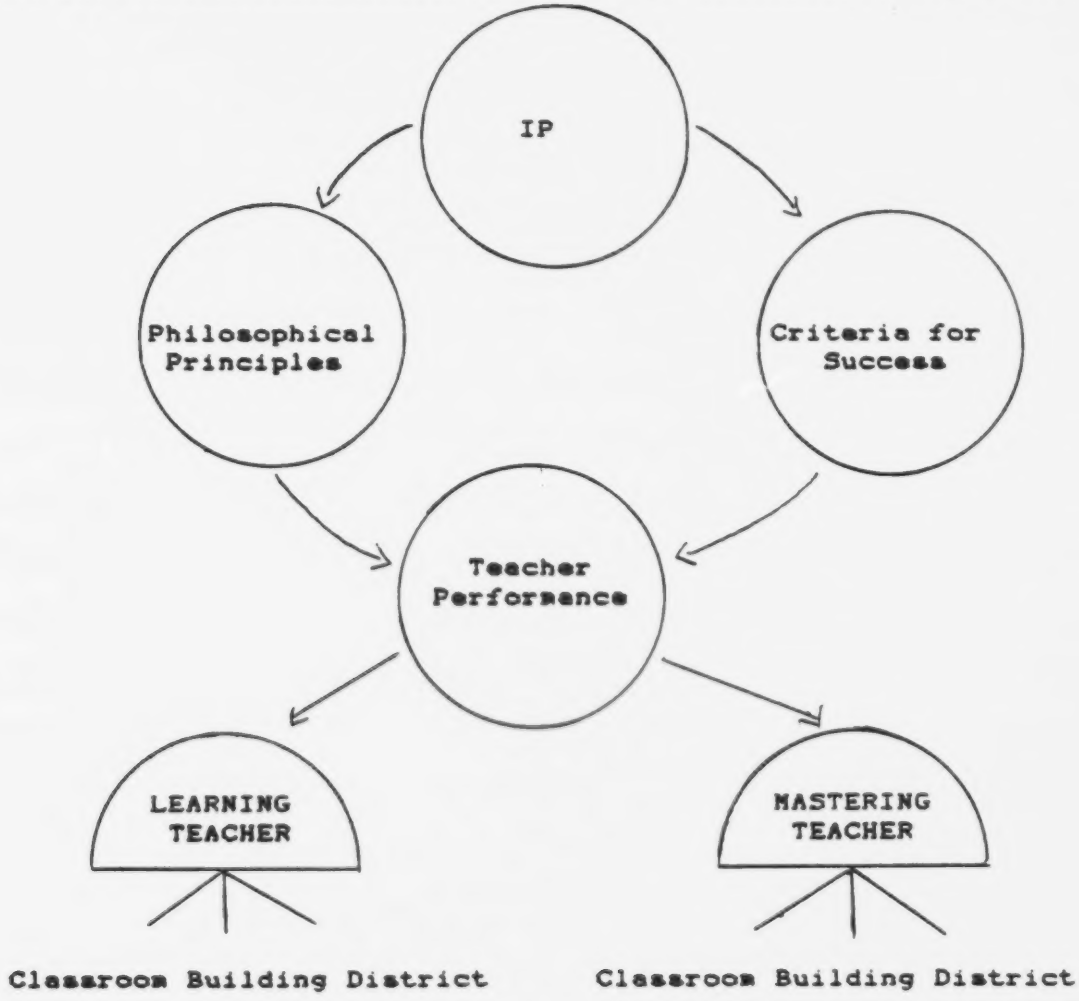
[2] This term should be understood as distinct from master teacher. Master teacher implies the attainment of a fixed and set level of expertise. Mastering teacher, on the other hand, refers to the process of improving in the teaching profession where a level of expertise is never fixed but keeps on changing and being improved (see p. 13-14).

category because we think it illustrates best 1) the actions, behaviors and ideas the principals encourage in teachers; 2) the perceptions principals have about what the teachers are doing in their schools and for the district; and 3) the principals' understanding of what the role of the teacher in this district is and should continue to be. First, however, we will present a brief description of the model.

[Figure 1]

The first component in the model is the district's instructional process (IP). We placed this component at the top because all the actions, behaviors, ideas and activities that the school administrators encourage in the teachers as well as the criteria for evaluating teacher performance appear to be measured against this instructional approach. The staff development program and the evaluation of this staff are oriented towards the enhancement and sophistication of this instructional process. The central school records describe the CSD as having a "K-12 outcome-based/mastery learning program that includes all areas of the curriculum and all the personnel" (Columbia Central School District, Mastery Learning Conference, October, 1984). Also, in the annual teacher evaluation records, this instructional process appears to be the core around which

INSTRUCTIONAL EVALUATION OF TEACHERS:
PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES



principals disseminate information and feedback to the teachers. The following texts by four different principals in different years evaluating different teachers emphasize this perspective:[3]

> ... past growth and observations center about the instructional process as it relates to mastery learning.
>
> ... provides appropriate learning cues through motivation and utilization of the various aspects of the learning process as a very structured skills teacher in the team teaching environment. Clearly defined objectives, reinforcement, monitoring, interaction and guided practice for mastery learning. Is well planned/prepared for instructional process.
>
> Lacks the confidence and ultimately the skills to apply the instructional process effectively. Goes through the steps but it is an artificial situation. All teaching is geared to texts and workbooks....
>
> Another goal ... should consider is a study of mastery learning and how mastery ties into the instructional process model. It should also enable the teacher to verbalize to others outside the district exactly what we are attempting to accomplish in the CSD.

Next, there are two categories: philosophical principles and criteria for success. Philosophical principles refer to those beliefs that are implicitly or explicitly stated in the records and represent the tenets that guide not only the evaluation process but also the

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[3] The original wording of the evaluation records has been preserved in the interest of accuracy even when that wording is awkward or grammatically incorrect.

school administrators' expectations of, as well as their responsibilities toward, the teachers. Two fundamental principles appear to emerge from the data: 1) all teachers can become excellent teachers or what we call mastering teachers and 2) the school administrators and the district are providing and will continue to provide the necessary conditions to enable each teacher to become a mastering teacher.

Criteria for success refer to those characteristics, attitudes, and actions which school administrators value as necessary for the teachers to have in order to become the best they can be. Also, these characteristics, behaviors and actions seem to represent standards by which teacher performance is evaluated. Among some of the most highly regarded criteria for success by these school administrators are classroom implementation of the instructional process (IP); involvement at all levels -classroom, building and district; continuous change, which in most cases is equated with growth; relationships with students and peers; and last but not least, the ambassadorial role of mastering teachers to other schools and districts. Some of these criteria will be further explained below when we describe a mastering teacher in more detail.

The third category is Teacher Performance. It refers, as its name indicates, to the activities and actions

teachers carry out as well as the attitudes they exhibit. At this point in the research, we have divided this category into two components: learning teacher and mastering teacher. These terms represent two different and yet related types of teacher performance that are emerging from the analysis of the data. These types of teacher performance are different and yet related to each other because many of the actions and behaviors demonstrated by each category are the same. However, certain differences in the degree of sophistication of implementation of the instructional process and the type of involvement and activities carried out by these teachers are quite distinct. This category of Teacher Performance for the learning teacher and the mastering teacher is further subdivided into the kinds of settings where the teachers perform their duties: classroom, building, and district.

In general the inclusion of these settings is especially relevant for the description of teacher performance because the evaluation records show that the principals' perceptions of teachers instructional practice is not limited only to the teachers' accomplishments in the classroom. On the contrary, the term instructional practice appears to have been redefined in these schools so that it goes beyond the teacher's classroom to practice elsewhere in the building and district. These settings also influence

and are influenced by teachers' involvement; this involvement makes an impact on classroom performance. In particular, the subdivision of settings is especially appropriate for our description of what a learning and a mastering teacher is since teacher participation or lack of it in all of these three settings, among other things, will determine to a great extent where a teacher could be placed in these two categories.

Before we begin with our description of who is a mastering teacher and what she seems to be like, it is important to point out that when a teacher is perceived as fitting one of these categories, she IS NOT LOCKED into it indefinitely. On the contrary, there is a continuous drive on the part of the administrators and teachers to improve and grow. Learning teachers are always encouraged to perform better in the classroom, to become more involved in the building and district activities, to participate in workshops and training sessions, and to share and discuss ideas and plans with colleagues and administrators. In other words, there is a push on the part of the administrators for these teachers to become mastering teachers.

On the other hand, mastering teachers cannot stop performing at a certain "top" level after they have reached that level. Mastering teachers are expected to continue

growing, changing, and participating in the activities that administrators, the district, and the teachers themselves establish in order to continue pursuing "excellence."

As previously stated, we will mostly limit our description to delineating what a mastering teacher is because this type of teacher appears to exemplify what the school administrators perceive all teaching staff should become.

Mastering Teachers

It is difficult to define in a few words what the term mastering teacher means because the actions and behaviors of this type of teacher are not limited to what she does in the classroom, but also spread to activities she performs at the school building level and at the district level and how she impacts all of them. We could probably say that a mastering teacher is, in a way, a master teacher, one who possesses the knowledge, expertise, and skills that enable her to perform her job in an excellent manner and with excellent results. However, unlike the association one has with the word master, as one who already has acquired all there is to know in one's profession, the term mastering implies an acknowledgement of all that there is still to know, to be learned, to be mastered in order for her to continue at the forefront of the profession. Regardless of how excellent a mastering teacher is, there is always expectations for

improvement. Perhaps the best way to describe a mastering teacher in this district is to describe what this teacher does at the classroom, building and district levels. The image that emerges from these descriptions will best portray the picture that we want to depict when we talk about mastering teachers.

District. In this setting, a mastering teacher is perceived as an ambassador or representative for the district. This teacher is the one who represents most fully the beliefs, attitudes, and actions that the principals perceive as best symbolizing what the district stands for. The visibility of the mastering teacher encompasses internal and external audiences. In internal audience, we include all the teaching staff and school administrators in the district. The mastering teacher is the teacher that gives presentations during district-wide meetings in order to inform and demonstrate the latest state of the art in the teaching of different strategies or the instructional process and how these can be implemented in the classroom. Also within the schools and district, the mastering teacher works toward bringing together some sort of curriculum alignment to the district's curriculum development process.

At the external position, the mastering teacher attends nationwide conferences in which she is invited as a speaker

to talk about the instructional process she is using in her classroom and district. Furthermore, some mastering teachers act as consultants to other school districts in order to help these districts understand what it is that the CSD is doing so well. The districts or schools that the mastering teacher visits are either attempting to implement a similar teaching approach or are considering revisions in their instructional practices. This is the reason why, we infer, the school administrators perceive the mastering teacher as the best ambassador for the district. This aspect is also described in the records:

> ... is a teacher who values good planning and the "team effort". She has often shared her expertise with visitors and with others around the country. She is a "blue-chip" teacher who models the excellence that this school seeks to stand for.
>
> She was a consultant at the mastery conference, a presenter at Superintendent's Conference Day, assisted many visitors and has represented our school and district many times on the road.
>
> ... is an outstanding practitioner and a model of a mastery learning-outcomes based program, teacher. He has proven to be exemplary for numerous observers and visitors. He has spent hours of his time discussing and sharing programs with visitors.

Building. Perhaps involvement and dedication are the words that describe best the relationship which principals envision exits between the mastering teacher and the school building. The descriptions in the records indicate that the

school buildings function the way they do, to a great extent, because of the active and participatory role the mastering teacher performs. The range of tasks and activities she undertakes is quite diverse. However, in all these activities, an effort is made to involve all the school staff.

In the eyes of the principal, the first activity in which the mastering teacher seems to be a leader is in the implementation of the instructional process. The mastering teacher is or becomes a "core" person in the use of the instructional process and/or in any of the other teaching strategies that the school administrators and district wish to incorporate into the instructional program. A core person is one who not only possesses knowledge and skills in a particular area but also a person who can demonstrate well the use of that area in the classroom. Furthermore, part of the responsibility of being a core person is to teach other staff members what that process or strategy is and how to incorporate it into the classroom. In other words, training others in the area of which she is a mastering teacher is one of the main responsibilities of a core person. For example:

> ... has served this year in the following capacities 1. team leader, 2. 4Mat core facilitator and demonstrator ... continues to be a most supportive staff in our building. Her constant

> positive approach with her students and her excellent classroom performance exemplify our mastery program and models for others those techniques desired in teachers.
>
> ... was a member of the Talents Unlimited core group. For Talents, she renewed practices in her classroom. She was also part of the newly trained CPS group.

Second, the mastering teacher is also seen as an active participant in the process of curriculum development. Unit guides are written, revised, and renewed in conjunction with other teachers in order to incorporate the instructional process. These units then will be tried out in the classroom. This activity as well as the one described above requires a great deal of teamwork and the sharing of experience and expertise on the part of the mastering teacher. This fact, however, does not seem to bother the mastering teacher. It is a fact that seems to come naturally to her.

Finally, the training of peers, the teaming practices which the mastering teacher actively participates in, and the sharing of ideas, knowledge and skills among the mastering teacher and her peers also help create an envigorating and active building atmosphere, which school administrators perceive not only as necessary but also as essential for the well functioning of the school.

> ...strong leadership role in several areas. She has worked with team B teachers to develop, test, and critique the new social studies planning

> guides. These guides were shared with colleagues at a workshop led by ... at the Superintendent's Conference Day.
>
> She also was trained in Investigations. ... has felt more successfull this year as there was a sense of connectiveness, problem sharing and problem solving with team colleagues. She is motivated to continue to improve instruction and with ongoing intensified efforts and team orientation next year can offer still more growth.
>
> ... cooperative attitude, team spirit and upbeat optimism, when coupled with a solid instructional performance contributes significantly with the mission of our school.

Classroom. The principals perceive the mastering teacher as one who excels in the classroom. This is the place where she can demonstrate what she knows, where she can incorporate new ideas and strategies into her lesson plans and teaching practices, where she cannot only implement the basic components of the instructional process but also the place where she can start raising its level of implementation into higher levels. The classroom, however, also represents the place where the mastering teacher faces the biggest challenges since her performance is not delivered in a vacuum. Her students are her main concern and the most important reason for the planning and preparation as well as the delivery of instruction. Furthermore, the classroom environment and the atmosphere she creates has to be conducive and appropriate to stimulate student learning. In other words, the school administrators

perceive the mastering teacher as that type of teacher that prepares for and during classroom instruction, taking into consideration the following aspects: 1) her pupils, 2) her utilization of the instructional process, and 3) the environment and atmosphere of her classroom. These areas will be dealt with separately for purposes of description but it should be realized that in practice they are all interrelated.

The mastering teacher is perceived as a teacher who makes her pupils the focal point of her planning, preparation and delivery of instruction. The mastering teacher seems to be concerned in particular about the students' cognitive and affective development. Therefore, lesson plans and classroom instruction will be developed and oriented toward enhancing these areas.

> Teacher-pupil relationships are enhanced through application of mastery principles of encouragement, caring and providing good self-concept experiences for pupils.
>
> ...teaching skills are enhanced by the enthusiasm and in providing pupils with an exciting and positive learning experience. She possesses those skills in instructional techniques which provide for the need of all pupils....
>
> Techniques of instruction are geared to the needs of all pupils. Alternative modes are implemented so that each and every child may experience success. Her tolerance with pupils who have a less than positive attitude towards learning is inexhaustible. Interest in areas of writing and literature is high and is reflected in her expectations of her pupils.

> Plans/preparations are made for specific objectives and selects a variety of learning activities to to meet the needs and differences of each individual pupil.

Next, principals' understanding of the mastering teacher performance indicates that in the planning and delivery of instruction, the mastering teacher is also intentionally concentrating on implementing the district's instructional process. The philosophical foundations of this process rest upon the principles of mastery learning. The set of components that make up this process takes into consideration the pre-instruction, instruction, and post-instruction stages of teaching. The mastering teacher pays special attention to implementing and following these components until this process becomes second nature for her. When this process is in place, she starts incorporating and meshing different teaching strategies (eg. cooperative learning, creative problem solving, investigations, talents unlimited, among others) into this process in order to raise its level of implementation to take into account different students' needs, and further improve modes of learning, or feedback procedures. The evaluation records clearly reflect this point:

> Techniques reflect emphasis on the basic skills of mastery. Clarifies lesson objectives using "best shot" instruction. Carefully guides class interaction to involve most students. Encouragement, reinforcement, and positive feedback

> given. Motivational techniques are used for reteaching various alternatives. Selects material carefully and organizes well to meet the needs of the learner.
>
> Classroom performance reflects her positive abilities in dealing with our mastery program and specifically, the instructional process. My classroom observations, and those of her coordinator, point to areas which include planning, correctives and guided practice as strengths for ... in the classroom.
>
> She has worked with the instructional goals, namely, the best shot mode of instruction and pre-requisite skills and has demonstrated a growth level to the area of application and creativity stages. She has also developed the mastery techniques and is constantly refining and implementing the use of enrichment activities, correctives ....

With respect to the classroom environment, the mastering teacher is perceived as a person who creates a caring and nurturing atmosphere so that the students and teacher herself can feel at ease and motivated to engage in active participation during the teaching process. A positive, enthusiastic, creative and encouraging attitude is needed by the teacher in order to create such an environment. A mastering teacher appears to possess these characteristics, and some others. Her classroom performance, according to the principals, seems to represent how masterful she really is at what she does in the classroom.

Finally, we should point out that the classroom door of the mastering teacher is always open to other teachers, from the district or from other districts, who wish to observe,

to get information and to learn about the instructional process being used. Some of the excerpts from the evaluation records summarize quite clearly how principals perceive who is a mastering teacher and what she does and represents:

> ... models what this school stands for--excellence in teaching and learning. And, she is still getting better.
>
> ... cooperative attitude, team spirit and upbeat optimism, when coupled with a solid instructional performance contributes significantly to the mission of our school.

Learning Teachers

The degree of expertise in the implementation of the district's instructional process and the degree of involvement and participation in the building and district activities appear to be some of the main reasons why principals perceive learning teachers as different from mastering teachers. The learning teacher, however, is continuously striving to acquire more knowledge and experience in those areas the school administrators deem essential for her to possess.

One of the areas in which principals urge learning teachers to improve is in the full application of the instructional process in the classroom. By full, we imply two things. First, the learning teacher should incorporate all the components of the process in her classroom

instruction. Second, in the event that this is already being done, an attempt should be made to raise the level of implementation by incorporating in her teaching any of the other teaching strategies the principals and district view as essential for achieving excellence in the overall instructional program. After this is accomplished, the learning teacher is advancing toward the level of a mastering teacher. However, more than this is expected from her. Principals perceive that part of the teacher's responsibilities and obligations is to be involved and participate actively in the building and district activities. She has to become a mastering teacher not only at the classroom level but at the building and district level to be seen truly as a teacher who contributes to the total school effort. The records illustrate this:

> ... willingness to improve. ... has developed and put together numerous creative and innovative lesson ideas. She cares about her students. But, the basic elements of the instructional process, classroom management and control must be improved to allow these lessons to fully impact students.
>
> Teaching performance carried out with components of the instructional process being dealt with. However, there is a need to preview the lesson in terms of what pupils can reasonably deal with. Best shot instruction needs to be dealt with more intensely and not as a part of another component. At times, attention needs to be given to those pupils who lose interest in what is going on. Motivation and cue setting are good, but instructional portions of the process need to be dealt with and modified.

> Many useful and effective teaching skills. However, full involvement in the beliefs practices, direction and team progress of this district and school will help him improve, just as it helps others. This is a team school, where staff members learn to teach with ever growing levels of expertise.

Learning teachers can and do indeed become mastering teachers. School administrators are constantly informing the learning teacher about those areas in which she is doing an excellent job and those in which an added effort might bring about still further success. New tasks and goals are set, and if accomplished, little by little, the involvement and participation of the learning teacher expands from the classroom level through the school level to the district level and beyond. New responsibilities are taken up, and in the end, a learning teacher becomes a mastering teacher.

Conclusion

Many patterns have emerged from these data which create a strong link among all the principals from the four schools in the district. All the principals, without exception, placed a great deal of emphasis on and encouraged certain behaviors, actions and/or attitudes in teachers that would enable them to teach better, reach more students, grow professionally, and contribute toward the CSD goal: excellence through the implementation of its instructional process. The information provided in the records is one in

which the positive, and not the negative, is reinforced and looked for.

In general, the message principals send to teachers is one that says "all teachers can become mastering teachers." This message is delivered in a special way. First, principals communicate to teachers what their goals are, what they expect the teachers to accomplish and what type of help or reinforcement teachers may demand from them. This can only be done if all the principals have clear expectations of what they want the teachers to do and where they intend to go. A coherent set of expectations and goals shared by principals is emerging from the data. Second, The enhancement and sophistication of the district's instructional process is coming into view with a strong force. Third, principals make teachers strong participants in the success of the teachers' and district's accomplishments. In other words, successful teachers, be they mastering teachers or learning teachers becoming mastering teachers, represent what principals believe teachers ought to be in order to fulfill the mission of the district.

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